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Through the blizzards with the Mounties' last dog patrol

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Butterflies and moths, as you've never seen them before, by Glen Loates

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THE MOUNTIES' LAST DOG PATROL

The dog teams of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police did more than bring law and order to the scattered peoples of the Canadian Arctic. For the past 70 years they also brought mail and medicine and, not infrequently, rescue.

Strung out ahead of a lonely policeman, their warm breath freezing into sharp white puffs, they are the mind's picture of the strapping North. And now these two dog teams, moving slowly toward us across the ice of a blizzard-swept lake, are the end of their line.

This is the last dog patrol the Royal Canadian Mounted Police will ever make. We are standing by our snowmobiles – the machines that will replace them – and, as a roar from our engine rolls across the emptiness, it smothers the dogs' excited yelps. It is a loud and ugly noise and somehow, as it smashes the serenity, it makes you a little angry. And a little sad.

It is bitterly cold and it's an ordeal simply to stand and watch their efforts. The temperature is 4 degrees below zero, and the wind howls in savage gusts of 40 m.p.h. and more across the Arctic wastes, biting through the supposedly windproof outer cover of our Indian-made parkas, buffeting and numbing us as the wind chill hits 60 degrees below zero.

Photographer Ken Elliott and I, even though we have several layers of clothing under our parkas, feel the icy wind creep inside and play up and down our backs. Our fingertips and toes ache. Elliott's beard is ice-covered and ice hangs on the wolverine fur trim of our parka hoods.

It is an effort just to look at the teams, for i

The Mounties say goodbye to their sled dogs, and a writer-photographer team from The Canadian Magazine goes to the Arctic to record the end of a proud chapter in the history of the force

By Peter Moon

Photography: Ken Elliott

xposes our faces to the needle sharp blast of the ind. We feel the warmth being sapped from ur bodies.

It is so cold the film in Elliott's cameras shat- ers. The shutters in his cameras freeze.

Gook, the first team's lead dog, flounders in ne deep snow as the wind hits him broadside. he 10 dogs behind him strain in their traces s they fight for their footing against the weight f the toboggan and its 600-pound load.

The second team struggles along the trail left y the first but comes to a panting, exhausted op as the driver's voice calls "whoa" above the ail of the wind.

The driver leaves the toboggan and walks up he length of the team, his thickly-mitted hands reaking the ice off the encrusted eyes and nouths of the 10 Siberian huskies.

He fights his way back through the thigh-deep snow to the toboggan and yells: "Hi, Toby, hi." The dogs throw their weight against their harness, the driver pushes against the toboggan, and the team moves forward again.

The patrol consists of Constable Warren Townsend, 23, and Special Constable Peter Benjamin, a 40-year-old Loucheux Indian, and 21 purebred Siberian huskies. They had left the tiny, isolated Indian settlement of Old Crow, where they are stationed, that morning and were on their way to Fort McPherson, more than 200 miles away in the Northwest Territories.

A two-man patrol has made the trip from Old Crow each winter since the 1930s, checking on the safety and welfare of isolated trappers and families, and bringing the presence of law and order. Now this is the last one. And it is being made largely for nostalgic reasons, for the RCMP is a proud force with a strong sense of its own traditions. The patrol even carries mail – letters that will go into the force's archives, the RCMP museum and the prized personal collections of a number of residents of the North. The Mounties stopped carrying mail on this patrol when airplanes began regular flights over the North after the Second World War.

Progress on this first day is pitiful. The teams complete only 11 miles. The dogs tire quickly as the old trail they try to follow is obliterated by blinding snow.

Elliott and I are accompanying the patrol on snowmobiles. But on this awful day even we have our problems, though we have Indian guides. The guides drive the snowmobiles while

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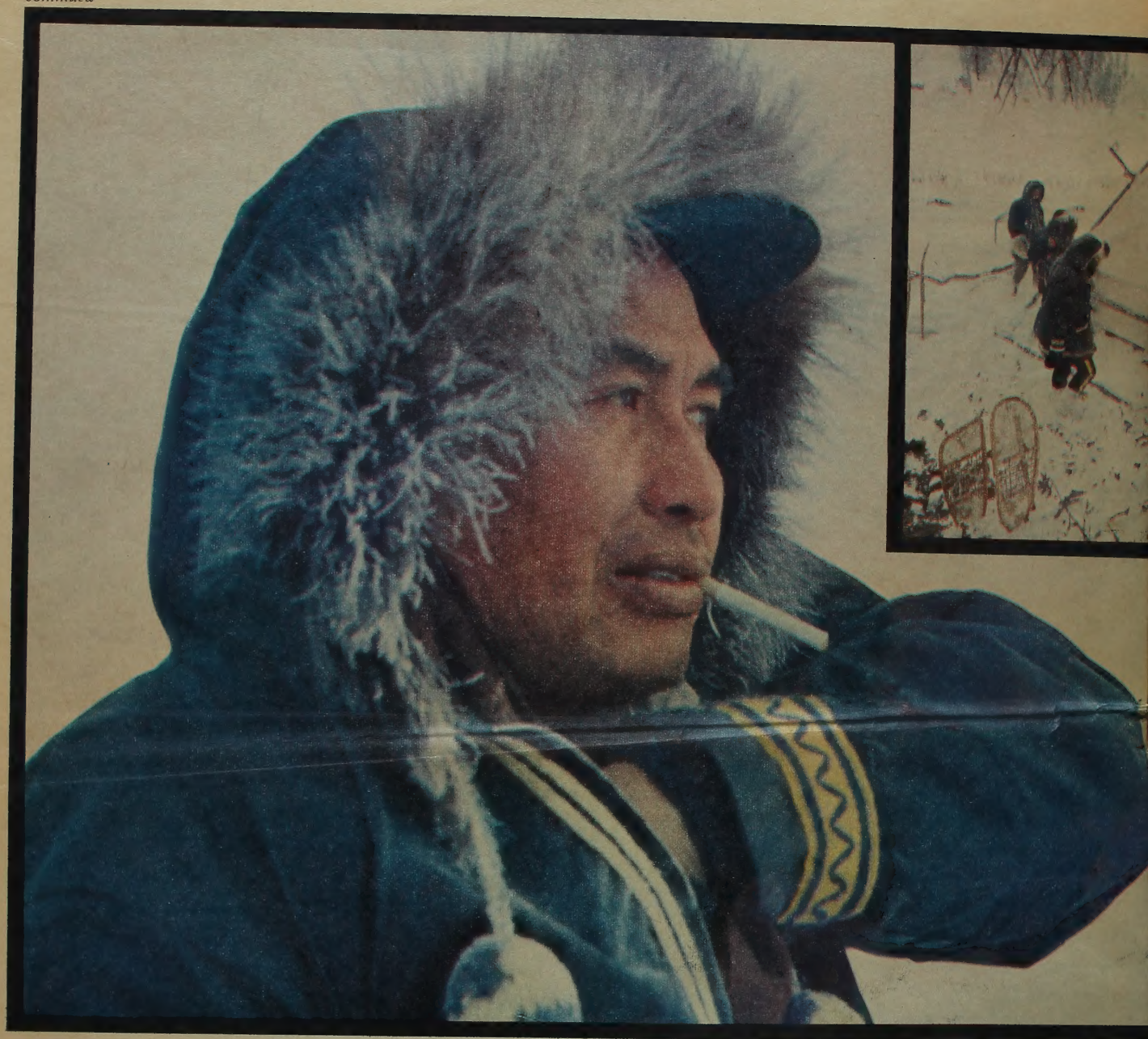


we handle the toboggans they drag along behind. Within the first two hours, Elliott's nose and ears and my face are frostbitten.

The snowmobiles bog down in waist-deep snow as we try to cross a mile of frozen muskeg. Special Constable Benjamin, his strong Indian face already showing signs of strain, joins us in trying to get our lead snowmobile moving. The bitter wind sears our throats and nostrils as we gasp with exertion. Benjamin suddenly reappears on snowshoes and runs up and down in front of the stranded machine, packing the loose snow down so we can get enough traction to move the snowmobile and the heavy toboggan forward.

We go ahead, trying to break trail for the dog teams. We finally reach the Porcupine River, and struggle on to Second Island where Chief Alfred Charlie and Johnnie Abel, our guides, build a fire and make tea.

More than an hour later, the two dog teams appear through the wind-whipped snow. Some of the dogs are too exhausted to even shake the snow out of their magnificent coats of hair and simply flop down, curl up in the snow, and go to sleep.

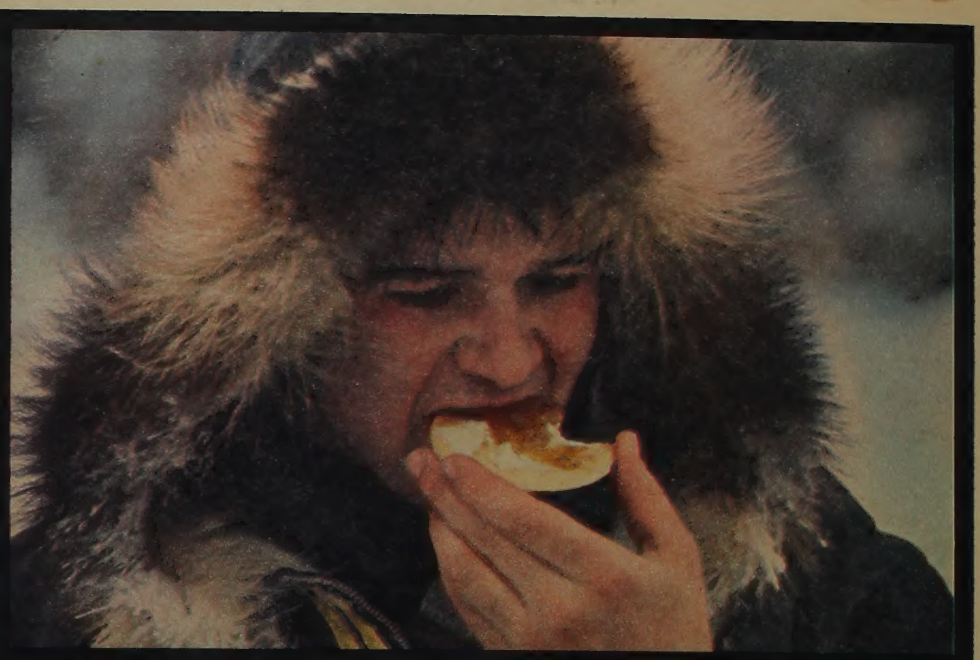
"The dogs are beat and so are we," says Constable Townsend as he gulps hot sweetened tea and wolfs down fried canned meat on hardtack biscuits. The meat on the biscuits is cold before he can finish two of them.

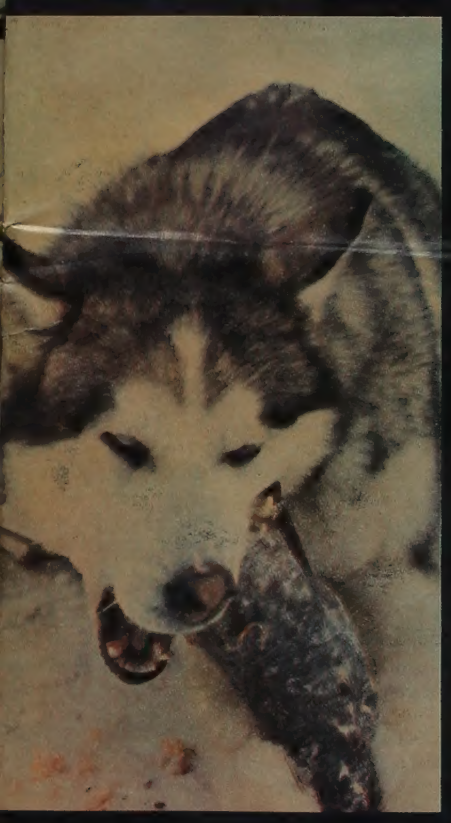
He kicks listlessly at the snow. "God, that's lousy snow," he says bitterly. "You just sink into it. Running behind that toboggan in this stuff is like trying to run in granulated sugar."

Townsend and Benjamin decide to make camp here. They and our guides unload the toboggans. They cut down spruce trees, use the tree trunks as tent poles, and lay the spruce boughs on the ground after tramping the snow down. Within half an hour the windproof trail tent is erected, wood is burning in the portable stove, and the tent is securely tied down to heavy tree trunks with snow packed around the edges to insulate it.

At 8:30 that evening, Townsend wrote the first entry in his patrol diary: "Mar. 11/69. Camp at 2nd Island. 11 miles. Wind gusts at 40-30 mph –4 degrees. Trail blown over with snow. Start 9:30 a.m. Camp 2:30 p.m. Supper – caribou and macaroni and cheese – canned fruit and bread – moose milk."

There wasn't a word about the appalling difficulties and hardships of the trail. Just plain simple facts. But the entry did end on a note of humor, one which is likely to be censored out before Townsend's patrol diary enters the Mounties' history books. For "moosemilk" is made from overproof navy rum, condensed milk, a dollop of sugar and hot snow water. "Boy, I could go all the way to





McPherson on just moosemilk and biscuits," sighed Townsend as he leaned his tired back against a packsack and sipped appreciatively from his steaming mug.

Townsend is a strongly built bachelor from Fergus, Ont. As a boy he read books about the RCMP, admits he often imagined himself wearing the famous scarlet tunic, and distinguished himself as a Scout and Rover before attending Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute as a student in commerce. His application to join the RCMP was accepted in 1966. Last year, he volunteered for northern service and was posted to Old Crow, where "I was really happy to hear they still had dogs."

This patrol is Townsend's first with dogs and he desperately wanted to make it, especially when he learned it was to be the last the Mounties would ever make with them. "I don't know where I'll go when I leave Old Crow," he says, "but I know one thing for sure. I'm going to miss those dogs. You really get attached to some of them."

Apart from six snowmobiles, dogs are the only means of transportation for the 195 people at Old Crow. Children and women can be seen with two or three dogs, hauling wood or blocks of ice for water from the river. The RCMP's Siberians are the most pampered in the settlement. Most Old Crow residents live off the land, and, when times are hard, their dogs go short. The Mounties' dogs, however, always get one good meal a day of cooked salmon, dog meal and rendered beef fat. Feeding them, cleaning out their corral, and exercising them takes up several hours each day for either Townsend or Benjamin. ➤

Far left: An RCMP insignia never seen "down south" is the official gold trim on Constable Peter Benjamin's parka.

Top centre: Spruce logs are used to anchor the tent in stormy weather.

Bottom centre: On the trail, Mountie dogs get frozen salmon once a day.

Top above: Constable Warren Townsend eats a trail lunch – hardtack and jam.

Above: When the proud huskies get into a fight, tangled traces often result.

continued

Across the featureless landscape of the Porcupine River country, Benjamin and Townsend drive their dog teams. Both photographer Ken Elliott and writer Peter Moon had to contend with frostbite.

Each Mountie knows the dogs by name and tends to have his favorites. Townsend's pet is his lead dog, Toby, a 60-pound mass of muscle and fur, who howls with excitement and leaps up and down as far as his chain will permit him when Townsend enters the corral. Their names hint at the affection their masters feel for them. There's Benjamin's lead dog Gook and his brothers, Gimpie and Gumpie. There's Tiny, Tom, Ted, Zeek, Randy, Snoopie, Willie, Smoker, Buster, Butch, and two bitches, Paula and Wilma.

The Mountie and his faithful huskies are synonymous with the North. But the North has changed. Ten years ago, the RCMP had 265 sled dogs which patrolled 53,443 miles, more than twice the distance around the world, in one year. Two years ago the dogs patrolled only 21,000 miles while snowmobiles covered 41,000 miles now there are only 78 dogs at four detachments and they will be replaced this summer by snowmobiles.

An incident that occurred four days before Townsend and Benjamin left on the last patrol strikingly illustrated the changed North. At the time, one Metis trapper, Peter Lord, was outside Old Crow, tending his trap line. A group of excited Indians hurried into the RCMP detachment to report a column of smoke in the vicinity of Lord's winter trapping cabin, 25 miles upriver.

An Alaskan bush pilot, Lyle Nelson, who was at Old Crow at the time, offered the use of his plane. "It'd take at least three hours to get the dogs ready and we wouldn't make it there for hours after that," Corporal Dan Wheeler, the other Mountie at Old Crow, had reasoned. "Hell, I can't see anything happening to Pete, he's too bush wise, but you'd better check, Warren. OK, go."

Nelson's small, single-engine Cessna 170 was over Peter Lord's cabin half an hour later, after being airborne only 15 minutes. The cabin was intact and after a search of the area, Nelson landed Townsend back on the river at Old Crow, only an hour after the smoke had first been seen. By plane, Townsend had covered the 25 miles to Lord's cabin in a quarter of an hour. When he and Benjamin left four days later on the last patrol, it took them a punishing two full days on the trail to cover the same distance. Their dogs had been so tired on the second day that five of them had to be cut loose to follow at their own speed.

Peter Lord, 52, greeted the exhausted police patrol and laughed when they mentioned their concern for him. "That wasn't smoke," he said, "it was a small tornado. You often get them up in the hills, even in winter. I see you in plane from upriver, but you turn your back."

Dinner that night began with muskrat tails, continued through beefsteak, caribou, macaroni and cheese, boiled muskrat, canned fruit and coffee, and ended with "scotch moosemilk" – scotch whisky, a spoonful of sugar and hot water. The dogs got their usual trail meal, two frozen pieces of dried salmon.

After dinner, the cabin warmed with the heat from the blazing wood stove, the air grew thick with cigarette smoke and everyone began swapping stories about dogs, Mounties, and famous old patrols. Outside the cabin it was 35 below.

Peter Benjamin began telling me about why he joined the RCMP as a special constable in 1955. He had been a trapper living upriver until fur became scarce and people began moving to Old Crow. "This is my ninth trip to McPherson," he said. "And, hell, I figure it's the worst one yet. They're all bad. But look at me now. I'm 40, I weigh 180 pounds when I used to weigh 145, and I spend my time around the barracks in Old Crow all the time. I'm just a fat old man and Christ, but I'm tired. If I snowshoe 10 miles now, I'm finished. At one time I could go on all day.

"Those dogs, they're no good, either. They aren't used to this heavy going. All they do is get run around Old Crow on good hard trails."

When the two snowmobiles arrive this summer at Old Crow, Townsend will leave because there won't be enough work without the dogs for three policemen. And most of the dogs will be given away. Benjamin's wife, Martha, who was Canadian women's cross-country ski champion in 1962, will probably get 10 dogs to race in next year's Whitehorse Sourdough Rendezvous. A couple of Mounties who were once at Old Crow may get one dog each and the odd one will be given to trappers.

"What about the rest?" you ask Townsend. "Well, the older ones, those that are seven or eight," he says "will probably end up being shot."

An embarrassed silence follows the remark and Peter Lord's cabin suddenly seems chilly. Somebody shuffles forward and self-consciously puts some wood in the stove. "Time to go to bed, I guess," says Lord. "You're going to need your rest, boys, it's 200 miles to McPherson."

Outside, a couple of dogs howl mournfully. "Must be a damned wolf about," says Lord, blowing out the candle. "One got my old lead dog just before Christmas. I sure miss that damn dog."